8

SHORT FORMS

8.0

A few years ago the late Brother B. Austin Barry of the Manhattan College Civil Engineering Department sent me an eight-page, 6" × 8" slick paper pamphlet. Each page was packed to its narrow margins with what my printer calls agate type (the smallest size font a normal eye can read without a magnifying glass). It was, in its second revision no less, the *constitution and by-laws* of a small engineering organization. I cite verbatim Brother Austin's transmitting buck slip:

Comments:

(1) I've not read this.
(2) Neither will you.
(3) Nor will anyone else.
(4) No one will follow it correctly (by reason of no. 3).
(5) I don't care.
(6) Neither will you.
(7) It's too long.

/s/ Commentator

In his humorously terse message, Brother Austin summarized the exact antithesis of the pamphlet. His well-taken point to that organization, and to me, was, at either of the two revisions, had the editors taken the effort to condense the document, it would have been read, understood, and followed. Thereby it would have been useful to its intended audience. In its present unabridged form, it is not any of those things: "It's too long."

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8.1 USES

A short form is the product of a specific process that shrinks or abbreviates, but does not truncate, a finished, fully written original text. It includes no additional material, nothing new that does not appear in the long, written document. In effect, a short form is a carefully miniaturized version of the original document, condensed to fit a specific need. It retains a few details germane to the *purpose* (reason) for that unique need.

8.1.1 ABSTRACT

An *abstract* appears at the top, preceding a finished document, but is written only *after* the entire document is complete. It should tell a prospective reader what the narrative is about, but *not* tell the narrative. Tell what *kind* of information is in the paper, but do not give the information itself. A researcher won't read your whole document if he can find what he seeks in the abstract.

8.1.2 INFORMATION RETRIEVAL

You may put your abstract, as is, on the Internet to enable a researcher to determine at a glance if its full document contains the information he seeks.

8.1.3 LETTER REPORTS

See Executive Summary (sec. 8.5).

8.1.4 PRESS RELEASES

State the key point in the opening sentence, name names, include a quote, then follow, in short, the procedure for writing an Executive Summary (sec. 8.5).

8.2

On two occasions ten years apart, to get a better feeling for how I taught the short-form exercise, I spent a day each time at two major Manhattan bookseller's technical writing sections. There, I ruminated over more than a dozen titles. Although none referred to the subject as "short form," many dealt with it solely as "abstract" writing. They all told me things like what an abstract is, what it might (or might not) include, and where it belongs in a document. Not one came to grips with a method for producing one. To be of real value to any writer, this volume does that, now.

In chemistry at New York's Stuyvesant High School, I learned that to replicate a substance (or variations) in any quantity, you must, by analysis, isolate and identify its every active element, then by synthesis recombine them. If the result is a rejuvenated original substance—success!

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Using that logic, I listed 13 words I know to be of the short-form genre:

abridgment	epitome
abstract	essence
condensation	précis
conspectus	quiddity
digest	résumé
distillation	summary
	synopsis

Then I looked at each word in three different dictionaries (Merriam-Webster, Random House College, and The Reader's Digest Great Encyclopedia). Noting the 39 definitions, each on a file card, I laid them out and sought common lines among them. Not every one included the same elements; many had some, a few had them all. The four common threads to appear most often defined the *characteristics* of a short form. They are:

8.2.1 REDUCE *PRINCIPAL MATTERS* TO *FEWEST WORDS*.

Eliminate minutiae and embellishments. A young man learning to play the tuba did his first solo. It sounded like a Brazilian Samba in triple time. The teacher stopped him, asking what he was playing. His reply, "The score," prompted the teacher to have another look. Then he admonished the novice, "Please, play only the notes, never mind the fly specks" (app. 8.2.1).

8.2.2 GIVE A *GENERAL VIEW* OF THE *OVERALL SITUATION*.

That is perspicacity, the skill to envision a perspective view of the *big picture*. A standard 8"× 8" print of an aerial photo shot at 5,000 feet will show all of Central Park, shrunk to scale (short form). An 8" × 8" sod block cut from park ground shows only 64 sq. in. of sod (truncation).

8.2.3 SEPARATE CAUSE FROM EFFECT, AND LABEL EACH.

In some instances, what is a cause can become an effect in the same paragraph.

Cause	*Effect*
change of ambiance	precipitation
precipitation	soil flooding
soil flooding	particle movement

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